The Packinghouse Jungle

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You leave for work before 7 A.M. The walk to work takes you past pens full of animals. An awful smell hangs in the air. There is no green plant to be seen in any part of the neighborhood. You spend your whole day in labor which could be cold and damp, or could involve the chance of serious injury, and all for as little as fifteen cents an hour. Many unskilled workers in the meat-packing industry in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century went through this every week. The huge system they worked in was based on one thing—the refrigerated rail car. Thanks to it and the refrigerated steamer, meat-packing of the late 1870s turned from a regional into an international business. The workers came from many backgrounds—Ireland, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, what is now the Czech Republic, and what is now Slovakia. Many could not speak English. All of them found deplorable conditions, both in the homes and the factories of Packingtown, a part of Chicago's industrial South Side. Unions and strikes failed to unite the skilled and unskilled workers. Worst of all, *The Jungle* written by Upton Sinclair to expose the plight of the meat-packing workers, only succeeded in passing meat inspection laws. With meat-packing's transformation into a large business, workers became highly diverse and protested their working conditions through strikes, being trapped in a situation that *The Jungle* could not change.

Meat-packing following the Civil War is divisible into two periods—before and after the refrigerated rail car. Prior to the refrigerated rail car, meat-packing was a regional industry. Few plants had more than 100 employees. There were a number of plants, each working mainly

during cool weather. Without a way to refrigerate meat, the meat-packing industry could not change. When the refrigerated rail car was perfected in the late 1870s, meat packing became an industry that reached across the nation. Five huge companies, Swift, Armour, Morris, Cudahy, and Schwarzschild and Sulzberger, controlled most of the industry. No other company controlled more than one percent of the market. Immigrants poured in to work for them. The Irish and German "all-around" butchers were forced to give way to the new system. Although skilled labor remained and humans did most of the work, a mass production system had begun. A worker in a cattle killing gang filled one of the 78 jobs, each a minute task repeated thousands of times daily. However, with the bulk of the work requiring little skill, hiring was casual. Foremen went to the crowds waiting at the gate for work and chose the healthy. Workers could lose their jobs only a few hours after getting them. This world of mass production, monopolies, and uncertain employment, is the world Upton Sinclair wrote about in *The Jungle*.

The workers of Packingtown lived in poverty, relying on boarders and child laborers for financial survival. The main reason for their poverty was the irregular employment the packing plants offered. If you were injured, you would not get your job back when you recovered. Luckily for the workers, the huge city of Chicago offered opportunities to earn money outside of work. One way was to take in boarders. Sadly, this system increased congestion, aggravating the already poor health conditions. The boarding system, like everything else in Packingtown, remained within the ethnic groups. Although they may have lived in America, the workers often maintained strong ties to their homelands. Schools, churches, even marriage, were within a single ethnic group. Efforts to "Americanize" the immigrants met with little success, and the problems of Packingtown remained for years. Another way for families to earn additional income was child labor. Children went to work at fourteen, the earliest legal age, at least in the meat-packing plants. Other industries were more lenient. Slowly, children became casual

laborers, much like their parents. Child labor quickly weakened the immigrants' sense of national identity. It also created tension between children and parents. The heads of the family saw ethnic diversity at work too. The old Irish and Germans saw ethnic diversity at work too. The new Eastern European immigrants were unskilled. After the turn of the century, blacks from the Deep South added to the mix, and in World War I, women began to appear. Hence, packing-house workers lived in a dangerous state of poverty and tension with their children; moreover, with the addition of their awful working conditions, they were ready to strike at any time.

Unions and strikes often failed to unite the skilled workers and the unskilled. The skilled workers often formed successful unions and strikes. The unskilled were often left unorganized. The butchers had a strong sense of unity. For example, during the strikes and riots of 1877, 500 butchers marched in formation to meet the police, earning a two dollar a day increase. About a year later, the first unions appeared. In the 1880s the Knights of Labor established a foothold in the meat-packing industry, organizing the yards and displaying an impressive Labor Day parade. Sadly, their demands for an eight-hour day failed. By December, following another unsuccessful strike, significant bitterness developed toward the Knights. A later union, the Packinghouse Employees' Union, also failed to organize the various skills. A club organized by cattle butchers, the Blackthorn Club, showed that the skilled cared mainly about protecting themselves. In 1894, another show of skilled organization was the strikes engaged in out of sympathy for railroad workers. Once again, the lack of organization prevented success. A breakthrough was made in the spring of 1900, when the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America arrived in Chicago. President Michael Donnelly established twenty-one locals that covered every worker. The main problem was organizing by jobs, rather than by the plant at which you worked. The unions also helped with ethnic divisions by allowing contact across

ethnic lines. The union leaders also hoped that they could raise the standard of living for all workers. Despite the union's short life, it did accomplish some of its goals.

The Jungle was written to expose the plight of meat-packing workers, but it did not accomplish that aim. The plight of the workers was lost in the general uproar created by its revelation of unsanitary meat. Author Sinclair later said, "I aimed for the public's heart and by accident hit in the stomach." Through his book, the general public learned that meat was being processed from a number of unhealthy materials. Meat sales declined greatly, as the public grew distrustful of meat-packing companies. *The Jungle* also started action within the government. President Theodore Roosevelt was already suspicious of the meat-packing companies. He had eaten their meat in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and had a very low opinion of its quality. He began pushing a meat-inspection bill in Congress. After it was passed in 1906, the public began to relax. The law put meat-packing companies under a greater degree of government control, but it did little to help the workers. Fortunately, the workers were not completely forgotten. Several new laws established standards for their working environment. Another effect of *The Jungle* was an increase in the power of the unions. Workers realized better than ever before how badly they were being treated. Despite its failure to directly accomplish his aims, Sinclair did not fail completely when he wrote *The Jungle*.

Clearly, the world Sinclair wrote about was awful. The workers lived in poverty; they were forced to rent out their own homes and send their children to work to survive. The meat-packing companies had become very powerful since the refrigerated rail car and were called "the greatest trust in the world." The power of the companies was displayed whenever a strike began. Strikes usually ended in failure. After all, the meat-packing companies had discovered it was cheaper to fight than to appease. *The Jungle* could not help the workers the way in which it was meant. With meat-packing's transformation into a large business, workers became very diverse

and protested their working conditions through strikes, becoming trapped in a situation *The Jungle* could not change. However, *The Jungle*'s failure was not complete.

[From James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*; Jason Inchiocca, "Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*;" http://www.albany.edu/proijenren/1998_1999/student.projects/18-19/lit/upton_sinclairs_the_jungle.htm, Oct. 5, 2002; Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*.]